DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 314 969 HE 023 123

AUTHOR Fowler, Francis C.; Patterson, Fred
TITLE Graduate Student Attitudes: An Exploratory Study.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Little Rock, AR, November 9, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Doctoral Programs; *Educational Administration; *Graduate Students; Higher Education; Opinions; Questionnaires; Sex Differences; State Universities; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS University of Tennessee Knoxville

ABSTRACT

The study examined attitudes of graduate students (N=172) in the College of Education at the University of Tennessee (Knoxville) toward their programs. A 12-item self-administered questionnaire was developed in which 6 questions addressed administrative issues and 6 related to instructional ones. Initial analysis of results utilizing computer database capabilities led to further investigation which compared students in Educational Leadership with other doctoral students, Ed.D students to Ph.D. students, and male to female doctoral students. Students rated the six instructional items higher than the administrative ones. Ed.D students ranked adequacy of communication of program requirements significantly lower than did Ph.D. students. Doctoral students in Educational Leadership had significantly less favorable attitudes than other doctoral students toward: (1) professors' knowledge of subject matter; (2) quality of orientation; and (3) relationship of course content to recent research. There were no significant differences between male and female students' attitudes. The survey is appended. 12 references. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED314969

GRADUATE STUDENT ATTITUDES:

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

By

Frances C. Fowler and Fred Patterson

University of Tennessee Knoxville

A Paper Presented at the

Mid-South Educational Research Association Annual Meeting

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 9, 1989

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Frances C. Fowler

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

HE 023 123

INTRODUCTION

This study of graduate students' needs and concerns grew out of a number of "gripe sessions" which occurred among Educational Leadership doctoral students at the University of Tennessee Knoxville during the 1987-1988 academic year. These sessions, held openly during the required doctoral seminar and covertly in student offices, hallways, and Smokey's Cafeteria, covered a wide range of topics: the inefficiency of the university administration, the unclear nature of graduation requirements, the horrendous parking situation on campus, the lack of secure storage space, the absence of a meaningful orientation program for graduate students, and many, many other concerns.

During the 1988 Summer Term, several of the "gripers" found themselves in a graduate course in survey research methodology. When the professor announced that the eight students in the class would be expected to work on a joint piece of survey research, it did not take them long to discover a topic to investigate. The class agreed that it wanted to study the attitudes of graduate students in the College of Education. Somewhat to their surprise, the professor was perfectly amenable; and this study was begun. What was initially executed as an apprentice piece in a methodology class eventually served as the exploratory phase for a much larger project.

In this paper the exploratory research will be described in detail, as well as the questions which the findings raised for the researchers. It was these questions which ultimately led

them to undertake a full-scale piece of research during the 1988-1989 academic year.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In recent years, graduate students generally, including graduate students in education, have changed. They have "become increasingly older and more representative of women, minorities, and foreign students." (Schneider, 1984, p. 60) This fact has serious implications for those who plan, administer, and teach in graduate programs. Advanced study is stressful under the best of circumstances (Valdez, 1982). However, today's graduate students are likely to experience even greater stress than did those of earlier generations (McLaughlin, 1985). For them, the pressure of their graduate program includes more than large amounts of intellectual work and worries about finances--traditional problems for graduate students. It also includes the internal stress of role conflict in a rapidly changing society (Hite, 1985; Rimmer, Lammert, & McClain, 1982). Yet, studies of graduate students are rare. As Malaney (1987) says:

> Studies pertaining to graduate education in general have not been abundant, and research specifically related to students has been most lacking. (p. 86)

A search of the literature did, however, reveal a few scattered articles which relate to the special problems of advanced students, including nontraditional ones. In Brazil, Feldens and Duncan (1986) studied the attitudes of medical, dentistry, and nursing students toward their professors. They discovered that they valued instructors who explained clearly,

respected students, and stimulated their interest. These findings were similar to those which Feldman (1986) reported in a review of the research on the perceived instructional effectiveness of college teachers.

In the Netherlands, Van Rooijen (1986) recently studied the adaptation of "advanced students"--students in their second, fourth, and sixth years--at the Free University of Amsterdam. He discovered that most were well adapted, and that a positive adaptation correlated significantly with a positive evaluation of several aspects of the university's learning environment. These included curriculum coherence, cohesion among students, availability of information, and personal attention to students.

In the United States, several studies have identified problems faced by graduate students. In a survey of doctoral students, Valdez (1982) found that 81% had experienced moderate to severe stress during their first semester of study. He recommended a "buddy" system to deal with the problem. Similarly, Rimmer, Lammert, and McClain (1982) discovered much loneliness, anxiety, and role confusion among the graduate students whom they surveyed. The five greatest needs expressed all related to stronger support from and better communication with their departments. Female and minority students showed significantly more interest in counseling and support groups than did white males. Hite (1985) also found that female students had special problems; the doctoral students in her study described a lack of collegial support from faculty and felt that male faculty

and students had negative attitudes toward them. The men in her study felt more role congruence than did the women and reported more support from faculty.

Other researchers have focused especially on the issue of faculty support for graduate students. Bargar and Mayo-Chamberlain (1983) argued that graduate faculties which ignore the "social-psychological environments" (p. 409) of their students are responsible for the high percentage of ABD's. Similarly, McLaughlin (1985) found that a lack of interaction with faculty increased graduate students' stress levels. He concluded that:

> Identifying with the profession and feeling support and mutual respect between students and faculty members seems crucial for graduate students. (p. 489)

Other researchers have dealt with slightly different issues relating to graduate education. In her study of adult evening students at Pacific Lutheran University, Polycyn (1986) discovered that they differed from undergraduates. They were relatively uninterested in social life on campus, but ranked quality education, compensation, and recognition very high. Unfortunately for them, financial assistance for graduate students has dropped greatly since 1969 (Malaney, 1987). Taking a different approach to graduate student satisfaction, Smart (1987) found that those whose undergraduate majors were similar to their graduate fields were significantly more satisfied than were those who had made major changes.

In summary, then, the few existing studies of graduate

student satisfaction suggest that this is a subject which has just recently begun to attract attention. It would seem, too, that such research is greatly needed. As Rimmer, Lammert, and McClain (1982) put it: "Graduate students have some special and perhaps unique needs that are not being met." (p. 192)

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

After a preliminary literature search, the eight researchers developed a twelve item self-administered questionnaire to measure graduate students' attitudes toward their programs. Since the literature contained no previously used instruments, they used their own observations and perceptions to develop the items. Six items related to administrative issues, and six related to instructional ones. The researchers used a five point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1-5. This questionnaire also included a demographic section. A copy of the survey appears in the appendix.

Using a University of Tennessee Knoxville Summer 1988 Timetable of Classes, the researchers identified thirty-eight 5000 and 6000 level classes in the College of Education which were meeting during the last week of July. They assigned a number to each; and then, employing a random number table, they randomly selected sixteen classes to sample. They also randomly selected a list of eight alternate classes. Five of the researchers were assigned two classes; two were assigned three. During the period July 21-29, 1988, they contacted the professors of the classes and administered the surveys to the students.

Since three of the original classes could not be surveyed, alternates were used. A total of 173 graduate students had an opportunity to participate in the study; 172 did so, for a response rate of 99.4%.

The researcher who did not participate in administering the survey entered the raw data into a "D-Base" computer program. This provided a spread sheet of participant responses as well as a mean rating of each item and means for each demographic category.

In analyzing the data, the researchers first studied the overall results in the summary provided by "D-Base." They calculated the percentage of students in each demographic category. Next, they compared the survey items, ranking them from high to low. Noting that the instructional items were all rated higher than the administrative ones, they tested the significance of the difference between these proportions, using a Chi Square test at a .05 level of significance. (Of course, the fact that the sample had not been randomly selected meant that tests using inferential statistics were not, strictly speaking, legitimate. In this case the tests were employed for instructional reasons; both the professor and the students were aware of the implications of the fact that their sample was not truly random.)

Then, the researchers further analyzed the data by computing a mean of means and a variance for the means of the item ratings. They identified those ratings which varied from the group means

by at least one standard deviation. This procedure led them to select two groups for further study: students in Educational Leadership (EAS on the survey) and doctoral students. Both these groups had several scores lower than the sample as a whole. Visual inspection of the data suggested that it was not normally distributed. Therefore, in comparing groups, the researchers used a median sign test, which is non-parametric. They compared doctoral students in Educational Leadership (EL) to other doctoral students. They also compared Ed.D. students to Ph.D. students and male doctoral students to female ones, using a .05 level of significance.

In a further attempt to determine how EL and doctoral students differed from other groups, they analyzed their demographic characteristics, using percentages, and compared them to other groups.

FINDINGS

The demographic characteristics of the total sample appear in Table 1, expressed in percentages. The acronyms used in this and other tables should be interpreted as follows: EAS=Educational Leadership; CI=Curriculum and Instruction; HPE=Health and Physical Education; TAE=Technological and Adult Education; SPC=Special Services Education. All figures in this table are percentages.

In Table 2, each item is ranked from high to low, based on its mean rating on a 1-5 Likert-type scale. As can be seen, the six instructional items ranked higher than the six administrative

ones. A Chi Square difference between proportions test yielded a X^2 of 12.00, significant well beyond the .05 level, with one degree of freedom.

Comparisons of Ed.D. and Ph.D. students, using a median sign test, yielded one significant difference between these groups. Ed.D. students ranked item 1, communication of program requirements, significantly lower than did Ph.D. students. Chi square was 6.03, significant beyond the .05 level, with one degree of freedom. The demographic data for all doctoral students are shown in Table 3. The demographic data for Ed.D. and Ph.D. students are compared in Table 4.

A series of comparisons of doctoral students in Educational Leadership to other doctoral students is summarized in Table 5. This comparison yielded three significant differences. Table 6 gives demographic data for Educational Leadership majors. Starred figures differed from those of the total sample by plus or minus 10 percentage points.

A series of comparisons of male and female doctoral students' rating of the questionnaire items, using a median sign test, yielded no statistically significant differences.

Table 1

Demographic Data for Total Sample of Education Graduate Students

Demographic Category	Percentage
Major	
EAS	15%
CI	23%
ECP	7%
HPE	17%
TAE	10%
SPC	9%
Other	14%
Undeclared	5%
Program	
Undeclared	15%
Certification	5%
MS	60%
Ed.S.	2%
Ed.D.	10%
Ph.D.	8%
Undergraduate Major	
Education	28%
Other	65%
Undeclared	7%
Undergraduate Institution	
UTK	37%
Other	55%
Undeclared	8%
Gender	
Male	35%
Female	62%
Undeclared	2%
Age	
21-30	40%
31-40	41%
41-50	16%
51+	2%
Undeclared	1

Table 1, Continued

Demographic Category	Percentage
Current Occupation	
Teacher	40%
Other	60%

(Because of rounding, percentages may not always add up to 100.)

Table 2

Relative Ranking of Twelve Survey Items on Graduate Student Attitudes

Item		Mean Rating, 1-5 Scale
1.	Professors' knowledge of subject matter	4.31
2.	Professors' enthusiasm for teaching	3.98
3.	Professional relevance of course content	3.80
4.	Relationship of courses' content to recent research	3.74
5.	Professors' availability	3.63
6.	Opportunity for student collegiality	3.49
7.	Communication of program requirements	3.47
8.	Scheduling	3.43
9.	Administrative concern for student needs	3.29
10.	Quality of student orientation	2.94
11.	Availability of financial assistance	2.68
12.	Adequacy of financial assistance	2.57

N=172 Mean of means = 3.44

Table 3

Demographic Data for Doctoral Students in Attitude Survey

Demographic Category	Percentage
Major	
EAS	31%*
CI	22%
ECP	19%*
HPE	9%
TAE	6%
SPC	3%
Other	9%
Undergraduate Major	
Education	31%
Other	69%
Undergraduate Institution	13%*
UTK	13%*
Other	88%*
Gender	
Male	53%*
Female	47%*
Age	
21-30	16%*
31-40	53%*
41-50	25%
51+	6%
Current Occupation	
Teacher	31%
Other	63%
Undeclared	6%

*Differs from total sample by at least 10 percentage points.

(Because of rounding, percentages may not always add up to 100.)

Table 4

Comparison of Demographic Data for Ed.D. and Ph.D. Students

Demographic Category	Ed.D.	Ph.D.
Major		
EAS	47%*	8%*
CI	37%*	0%*
ECP	0%*	46%*
HPE	5%*	15%*
TAE	11%*	0%*
SPC	0%*	8%*
Other	0%*	23%*
Undergraduate Major		
Education	32%	31%
Other	68%	69%
Undergraduate Institution		
UTK	11%*	23%*
Other	89%*	77%*
Gender		
Male	55%	54%
Female	44%	46%
Age		
21-30	24%*	8%*
31-40	41%*	69%*
41-50	24%	23%
51+	12%*	0%*

*Differences of more than 10 percentage points between groups

(Because of rounding, percentages may not always add up to 100.)

Table 5

Comparisons of EL Doctoral Students to Other Doctoral Students on Seven Survey Items

Item	X^2 Value
Communication of program requirements	1.66
Professors' knowledge of subject matter	6.04*
Administrative concern for student needs	.12
Availability of financial assistance	.0001
Adequacy of financial assistance	1.10
Quality of orientation	8.09**
Relationship of course content to recent research	4.07*

Ununderlined items: EL students less favorable than others

Underlined items: EL students more favorable than others

*Significant at .05 level
**Significant at .01 level

Table 6

Demographic Data for Educational Leadership Majors on Attitude Survey

Demographic Category	Percentage
Program	
Undeclared	15%
Certification	12%
MS	31%*
Ed.S.	4%
Ph.D.	4%
Ed.D.	35%*
Undergraduate Major	
Education	50%*
Other	46%*
Undeclared	4%
Undergraduate Institution	
UTK	27%*
Other	54%
Undeclared	19%*
Gender	
Male	46%*
Female	54%
Age	
21-30	31%
31-40	35%
41-50	19%
Current Occupation	
Teacher	54%
Other	35%
Undeclared	12%

*Differs from total sample by at least 10 percentage points.
(Because of rounding, percentages may not always add up to 100.)

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

The analysis of the emographic data revealed that graduate students in Education at the University of Tennessee Knoxville are largely female--62%--and largely over 30--60%. Thus, these students reflect the trend noted by Schneider (1984) and should be considered nontraditional students at least as far as their gender and age are concerned.

The exploratory study also suggested that graduate students in Education at the University of Tennessee regard their instructional program more highly than they regard the administration of the university. All six "instructional" items were rated higher than all six of the "administrative" ones. Since the sample was not truly random, inferential statistics should be employed only with great caution. However, the fact that a Chi Square test revealed that the difference between the proportion of students ranking instruction high and the proportion ranking administration low was statistically significant suggested that this area of student attitudes might merit further exploration. It was not surprising that students were least satisfied with the financial aid program at the university. They ranked the availability of aid eleventh and its adequacy twelfth, or last. Many also failed to answer this question, or marked it "not applicable." These results suggested that a real problem existed in this area.

The differences between the Ed.D. and the Ph.D. students were unexpected. However, only one of these differences--

communication of program requirements--reached statistical significance. This probably reflects the fact that at the University of Tennessee the Ph.D. program is considerably more structured than is the Ed.D. program. It may also reflect the fact that Ed.D. and Ph.D. students tend to be enrolled in different departments. As Table 4 indicates, the major difference between these students was the departments in which they are studying; there was very little overlap between them.

Another surprising finding was the extent to which students in the Educational Leadership (EL) department rated items differently--usually lower--than did students in other departments. Three of these differences reached statistical significance, as shown in Table 5. Again, given the nature of the sample, the importance of these findings should not be exaggerated. Even so, they did suggest a possible problem area.

Three possible explanations for EL students' lower ratings suggested themselves to the researchers. The first was simply that, since the survey originated in the EL Department, it had more content validity for EL students than for others, so provided a more accurate measurement of their attitudes. Another possible explanation derived from the fact that between January and July 1988, that department was searching for a chairperson and then awaiting her arrival. This fact may have affected students' perceptions of their program. Feldman (1984) found an inverse relationship between students' perception that their

professor was anxious and their estimate of his or her competence. It is possible, therefore, that during the six months before the survey was administered, EL students were subliminally aware of their professors' concern about the search and the impending change in department leadership. Such an awareness could have negatively influenced their perceptions.

A third possibility was suggested by the literature. Though Educational Administration is located in the College of Education, traditionally it has been a man's field. Yet, as Table 6 shows, slightly over half of the students in EL at the University of Tennessee during July 1988 were female. Obviously, a change has been occurring in the clientele which this department serves. This change may be one which female students, male students, and faculty alike find difficult to deal with. In this context it was especially interesting to note that, as compared to other doctoral students, EL students were much more concerned about orientation. This finding may parallel the desire for counseling and support groups found by Rimmer, Lammert, and McClain (1982).

Surprisingly, however, this study did not reveal any significant differences between male and female students' attitudes, either as a total group or within the doctoral program. However, the instrument may have been too short and too general to detect such differences. Given the fact that such differences have been found elsewhere, it would not be wise to conclude on the basis of this simple survey that they do not

exist at the University of Tennessee Knoxville.

CONCLUSION

On the last night of their survey research methods class, the researchers discussed at length the meaning of their findings. They were especially impressed by three facts: (1) very little research had been done on graduate students' attitudes; (2) some of the differences which they had found in their admittedly limited study were statistically significant; and (3) their own department had differed greatly from the rest of the college.

In this discussion, the students and their professor spent a great deal of time grappling with the issue of validity. They were acutely aware of the weakness of their instrument and wondered if the fact that the survey had been developed in the EL Department meant that it measured EL students' attitudes better than it measured the attitudes of other students. Yet, given the paucity of graduate student attitude surveys in the literature, they had had little choice but to develop their own. And, given the time constraints of a class which met for just nine weeks, they had been forced to develop their survey on the basis of their own experiences and perceptions. Finally, the professor asked: "If you had the time and the money, what would you do to develop a more valid survey?" The students suggested that in the absence of a solid research on the subject, a qualitative approach might lead to greater content validity. They also recommended using unstructured interviews and open-ended

questionnaires with a population carefully selected to represent the whole college.

The issue might have ended there. However, two of the students continued to discuss the problem with each other. They felt that developing an understanding of the concerns of graduate students, especially non-traditional ones, could be a crucial step toward improving preparation programs in the profession. As potential university professors themselves, they felt that they had strong personal reasons for gaining a better understanding of the students who enroll in graduate level courses in education. When the Fall Semester began, therefore, they approached the professor and suggested continuing the research. He was delighted. A research group was formed, a mini-grant proposal was submitted to the Bureau of Educational Research and Services at the University of Tennessee, and funding was granted. The rest is history.

REFERENCES

Bargar, R.R., & Mayo-Chamberlain, K. (1983). Advisor and advisee issues in doctoral education. Journal of Higher Education, 54, 407-432.

Feldens, M.D.F., & Duncan, J.K. (1986). Improving university teaching: What Brazilian students say about their teachers. Higher Education, 15, 641-649.

Feldman, K.A. (1986). The perceived instructional effectiveness of college teachers as related to their personality and attitudinal characteristics: A review of synthesis. Research in Higher Education, 24, 139-213.

Hite, L.M. (1985). Female doctoral students: Their perceptions and concerns. Journal of College Student Personnel, 26, 18-22.

Malaney, G.D. (1987). Who receives financial support to pursue graduate study? Research in Higher Education, 26, 85-97.

McLaughlin, M.C. (1985). Graduate school and families: Issues for academic departments and university mental health professionals. Journal of College Student Personnel, 26 488-491.

Polycyn, L.J. (1986). A two-instrument approach to student satisfaction measurement. College and University, 62 (1), 18-24.

Rimmer, S.M., Lammert, M., & McClain, P. (1982). An assessment of graduate student needs. College Student Journal, 16 (2), 187-192.

Schneider, B.L. (1984). Graduate programs in schools of education. Journal of College Student Personnel, 28, 218-222.

Smart, J. (1987). Student satisfaction with graduate education. Journal of College Student Personnel, 28, 218-222.

Valdez, Ramiro. (1982). First year doctoral students and stress. College Student Journal, 16 (1), 30-37.

Van Rooijen, L. (1986). Advanced students' adaptation to college. Higher Education, 15, 197-209.

APPENDIX

GRADUATE STUDENT SURVEY
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

As a graduate student attending second term (or full term) summer school at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, you are asked to complete the following questionnaire regarding selected aspects of your program. Your honest opinions are solicited, and your anonymity will be strictly protected. Our report will provide aggregate data only. While your participation is urgently solicited, it is entirely voluntary; return of the questionnaire will be considered your informed consent to participate.

On a scale of 1-5 (1 = low; 5 = high) please rate each of the following ingredients of your study in the graduate program of the College of Education at UTK, including previous terms as well as this summer. Please circle your response.

	LOW				HIGH
1. Communication of program requirements	1	2	3	4	5
2. Professors' knowledge of subject matter	1	2	3	4	5
3. Administrative concern for student needs	1	2	3	4	5
4. Professors' enthusiasm for teaching	1	2	3	4	5
5. Availability of financial assistance	1	2	3	4	5
6. Adequacy of financial assistance	1	2	3	4	5
7. Scheduling of classes	1	2	3	4	5
8. Professors' availability	1	2	3	4	5
9. Opportunity for student collegiality	1	2	3	4	5
10. Professional relevance of required course content	1	2	3	4	5
11. Quality of student orientation	1	2	3	4	5
12. Relationship of courses' content to current research.	1	2	3	4	5

CONTINUE ON NEXT PAGE, PLEASE

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Area of interest (Major): EA&S___ C&I___ E&CP___ H&PE___T&AE___

Other___, Specify_____

Degree pursuing: _____

Undergraduate major: _____

Undergraduate degree from: _____

Gender: Male____ Female____

Age: 21-30___ 31-40___ 41-50___ 50+___

Current occupation/position:_____

COMMENTS:

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION